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THE LOST LEAF OF "PIERS THE PLOWMAN"

Summer before last, in the enforced leisure of a long convalescence, I reread *Piers the Plowman*, or perhaps I had better say, read it for the first time; for, although I had more than once read the first seven passus of the B-Text and various other parts of the poem, I had never before read the whole of all three texts in such a way as to get any real sense of the relations of the versions to one another. Fortunately, I did not at that time possess a copy of Professor Skeat's two-volume edition, and consequently was obliged to use the edition which he published for the Early English Text Society. Thus I read each version separately and obtained a definite sense of its style and characteristics. Before the reading was completed, I found myself obliged to question very seriously the current view in regard to the relations of the three versions. The problems became so interesting that I devoted myself to a serious and careful study of them, with the aid of all the available apparatus, and have made them the subject of two courses with my students, who have given me useful suggestions and much help.

Every sort of investigation to which the versions have been subjected has resulted in confirming my original suspicions, and, indeed, in changing them from suspicions into certainties. I am now prepared, I think, to prove that the three versions are not the work of one and the same man, but each is the work of a separate and distinct author; that of the A-Text only the first eight passus are the work of the first author, the principal part of the vision of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest having been added by another author; and that not only lines 101-112 of Passus XII in MS Rawl. Poet. 137 are the work of Johan But, but that he is responsible for a considerable portion of that passus, probably for at least one-half of it. These conclusions, if accepted, of course entirely destroy the personality built up for the author, mainly from details given only in the C-Text, on the theory that all parts of all three versions are by the same hand; and, indeed, make it doubtful, as I

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shall try to show, whether the autobiographical details were intended, even by the author of C, to be taken as genuine traits of the author himself instead of attributes of the dreamer—that is to say, whether the dreamer is not as much a fictional character as any of the other figures which participate in the dream. I shall try to support these conclusions by differences in language, differences in versification, differences in the use and in the kind of figurative language, and above all by such striking differences in the mental powers and qualities of the authors as make it highly improbable that they can be one and the same person; and I shall point out such misunderstandings on the part of each of the later authors of passages expanded by him as seem to me to change the probabilities derived from the other kinds of evidence into certainties. It will appear further, I think, that the merits of the A-Text have been seriously underestimated, and that it is in reality not merely artistically the best of the three, but is in unity of structure, vividness of conception, and skill of versification, on a level with the best work of the fourteenth century, including Chaucer's.

The materials supporting these conclusions are now well in hand, but I shall not be able to put them into form for publication until the advent of my vacation, which will occur in the coming spring. I feel confident that I can then fill out this outline and justify the promises herein made. I make this announcement now in order that other scholars may investigate the problems and be ready to pass a critical judgment upon my results when they appear. I am aware that this will prevent the book from creating any sensation when it appears, but it is of less consequence that the book should make a sensation than that the problems should be subjected to a long and critical investigation by more than one person. Meanwhile, I offer for consideration the investigation of a small problem which easily detaches itself from the general argument, although, as will be seen, it contributes something to it.

In the A-Text, the whole of Passus V is devoted to the effects of the preaching of Conscience upon the "field full of folk." Repentance comes to them, and they confess their sins and

promise amendment. The chief penitents are the personifications of the Seven Deadly Sins. The last of these personifications is Sloth. The passage concerning him begins with l. 222, and it is this passage, with the lines immediately following, to which I invite your attention.

- ¶ Sleupe for serwe · fel doun I-swowene
 Til *vigilate* þe veil · fette water at his eizen,
 And flatte on his face · and faste on him criȝede, 224
 And seide, "war þe for wonhope · þat Wol þe bi-traye.
 ¶ 'Icham sori for my sunnes' · sei to pi-seluen,
 And bet pi-self on þe Breste · and bidde god of grace,
 For nis no gult her so gret · his Merci nis wel more."
 ¶ Penne sat sleupe vp · and sikede sore, 229
 And made a-vou bi-fore god · for his foule sleupe;
 "Schal no sonenday pis seuen ȝer · (bote seknesse hit make),
 Þat I ne schal do me ar day · to þe deore churche, 232
 And here Matins and Masse · as I a Monk were.
 ¶ Schal non ale after mete · holde me pennes,
 Til ichaue Euensong herd · I beo-hote to þe Rode.
 And ȝit I-chulle ȝelden aȝeyn · ȝif I so muche haue,
 Al þat I wikkedliche won · seȝpe I wit hade. 237
 ¶ And þauh my lyfode lakke · letten I nulle
 Þat vche mon schal habben his · er ich henne wende:
 And with þe Residue and þe remenaunt · (bi þe Rode of Chester!)
 I schal seche seynt Treuþe · er I seo Rome!" 241
 ¶ Robert þe Robbour · on *Reddite* he lokede,
 And for þer nas not Wher-with · he wepte ful sore.
 And ȝit þe sunfol schrewe · seide to him-seluen: 244
 "Crist, þat vppon Caluarie · on þe Cros diȝedest,
 Þo Dismas my broþer · bi-souȝte þe of grace,
 And heddest Merci of þat mon · for *Memento* sake,
 Þi wille worþ vppon me · as Ich haue wel deseruet
 To haue helle for euere · ȝif þat hope neore. 249
 So rewe on me, Robert · þat no Red haue,
 Ne neuere weene to wynne · for Craft þat I knowe.
 Bote for pi muchel Merci · mitigacion I be-seche;
 Dampne me not on domes day · for I dude so ille." 252
 ¶ Ak what fel of pis Feloun · I con not feire schewe,
 But wel Ich wot he wepte faste · watur with his eizen,
 And knouhlechede his gult · to Crist ȝit eft-sones, 256
 Þat *Penitencia* his pike he schulde polissche newe,
 And lepe with him ouerlond · al his lyf tyme,
 For he haȝ leiȝen bi *latro* · lucifers brother.

It will be observed at once, that while ll. 222-35 are thoroughly appropriate to Sloth, ll. 236-41 are entirely out of harmony with his character, and could never have been assigned to him by so careful an artist as A, who in no single instance assigns to any character either words or actions not clearly and strictly appropriate. Careful consideration of the passage and comparison of it and ll. 242-59 with ll. 222-35, will convince everyone, I believe, that ll. 236-41 really belong to Robert the Robber, and are a part either of his confession, or of a confession suggested to him by someone else (cf. ll. 226-28). Robert the Robber, it will be seen, decides to make restitution of his ill-gotten wealth, or is urged to make such a decision, but, on looking for the goods with which to make repayment, is unable to find any, and is obliged to cast himself wholly and entirely upon the mercy of God. Is it not clear, then, that there is really a lacuna between l. 235 and l. 236; and evidently not a gap of one or two lines, such as might occur in consequence of the eye of the scribe catching up the wrong word and skipping a few lines? The query naturally suggested is: "May not a whole leaf of the MS have been lost?" This would make a gap of many lines, sufficient for the development of the confession of Robert the Robber upon some such scale as those of Envy, ll. 59-106, Covetousness, ll. 107-45, Gluttony, ll. 146-221; for a transition, if any be necessary, from these personified abstractions to the concrete figure of the Robber; and also for a less abrupt ending of the confession of Sloth. Many of the MSS measure $8\frac{1}{2} \times 6$ inches, or thereabouts (see Skeat's descriptions in the prefaces to the EETS ed.); MS L has c. 40 lines to a page, R has c. 31, W measures $11\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ inches, but is "in a large hand," Y has c. 37, O has c. 40, C₂ has c. 37, I has c. 31, F has c. 37, S ranges from 33 to 44, K has c. 34, Douce 104 has 34 or 35, Hl. 2376 has c. 37, Roy. B. xvii has c. 38; of the MSS of the A-Text, U has c. 33 (or, according to another statement, c. 28), D has c. 31, Trin. Dub. 4. 12 has c. 30. Of course there were also MSS much larger than these,¹ but it seems not improbable that the page of the original may have

¹ MS V has a very large page, containing two columns of 80 lines each; the Lincoln's Inn MS, written about 1450, has 52, 53 lines to a page; MS T runs from 42 to 46; H and Hl. 3954 have 40 each.

contained between 30 and 40, and consequently that the lost leaf may have contained between 60 and 80 lines.

But if the leaf was lost, it must have been missing in the original of all the extant MSS of the A-Text, for all of them contain the passage under discussion in precisely the same form, except for insignificant variations in spelling, etc. It is easy enough to understand how the copyists were undisturbed by the sense (or nonsense) of the passage, but it is not easy to see how the torn remnant of this half-sheet could have entirely escaped attention, if there were any such remnant; and if there was none, the other half of the sheet also would pretty certainly have disappeared very soon. This is precisely what I think occurred.

It has long been pointed out as a curious feature of the vision of the Seven Deadly Sins in this passus that the sin of Wrath is entirely overlooked and omitted. It is incredible that any mediæval author writing specifically on such a topic and dealing with it at such length¹ could have forgotten or overlooked any of these well-known categories; and it is especially impossible to ascribe such an omission to an author whose work shows the firmness and mastery of structure exhibited in A. Let us, then, inquire whether the same accident that caused the confusion in regard to the confession of Sloth may not have caused the total loss of the confession of Wrath.

Comparison of the order of the Sins in A II, 60 ff. (and the corresponding passages in B and C) with A V, 45-235, B V, 63 ff.; C VII, 14 ff. will indicate that the proper place for Wrath in this passage is immediately after Envy. This is indeed the usual order, and Chaucer, following Peraldus,² says: "After Envye wol I discryven the sinne of Ire. For soothly, whoso hath envye

¹ Wrath is also omitted in the feoffment in A II, 60-74, where the intention is clearly to give to False and Meed all the territories of the Seven Deadly Sins; but the loss involved is one of one line only, which may easily have been omitted in the original of all the extant MSS. In Skeat's text, l. 64, Lechery is also omitted; but the readings of four of the MSS show that MS V has merely omitted the words "of lecherie"—the only other MS recorded in the textual note has the correct reading, but it is inserted in a later hand, this line as well as the preceding having been inadvertently omitted. It may be remarked that the author of the B-Text failed to observe the simple and systematic nature of this feoffment (perhaps because of the omission of Wrath), and consequently, in expanding it, entirely obliterated the original intention. This is only one of many instances to be cited in favor of my main thesis.

² K. O. Petersen, *The Sources of the Parson's Tale*, p. 49.

upon his neighbor, anon he wole comunly finde him a matere of wratthe."¹ The place for Wrath in Passus V is therefore between l. 106 and l. 107. Between this point and ll. 235, 236, where the confusion in regard to Sloth occurs, there are 129 lines. Now it is clear that, if the two leaves of a sheet are gone, as we suppose, the gaps will be separated by four pages, or a multiple of four.² In the present instance the distance between the gaps makes about four pages of the size discussed above, and the lost double leaf was, therefore, the next to the innermost of a section or gathering. We might leave the matter here, but a little further inquiry will determine the precise number of lines to the page in the MS, and incidentally confirm our reasoning. The number of lines between the gaps is in Skeat's edition 129, as I have said; but l. 182 is in H only, and as Skeats suspects, is spurious, "being partly imitated from l. 177;" furthermore, ll. 202-7 are found in U only, and the first word of l. 208 shows that they are spurious, and that l. 208 should immediately follow l. 201. Seven lines must therefore be deducted from 129 to ascertain the number lying between the two gaps in the original. This will give us 122 lines, or two less than four pages of 31 each. As the number of lines to a page is never absolutely constant (Skeat finds it necessary to attach a *circa* to every statement of this kind), this would seem entirely satisfactory; but if space of one line was left between Covetousness and Gluttony, and between Gluttony and Sloth, the whole 124 would be exactly accounted for.³

Confirmation of this argument may perhaps be found in a circumstance pointed out to me by Mr. T. A. Knott, one of my students. He calls attention to the abruptness of the close of the confession of Envy, which has, of course, been noted by everyone; he thinks it not only abrupt, but unsatisfactory, and suggests that the leaf lost at this point contained, not only the whole of the confession of Wrath, but also a few concluding lines belonging to Envy.

¹ *P. T.*, § 32, v. 533.

² Of course the two gaps would make only one if the lost double leaf were the middle one of a section or gathering.

³ Clearly there were no headings, as in some MSS of B and C, for none of the MSS descended from A have them, but there may have been an interval of a line between the confessions. This supposition is, however, of little moment to the argument.

Still further confirmation, slight though it be, may be found, it occurs to me, in the fact that, while not only every new section, but every new paragraph, in some of the MSS collated by Professor Skeat, is indicated by a paragraph mark, none stands at the beginning of l. 236. And whatever may be thought of my contention that ll. 236-41 do not belong to Sloth, it is at least certain that they constitute a new paragraph. If they belong to Sloth, the mark was omitted by error; if to Robert the Robber, no mark stands there because the paragraph does not begin there but earlier, as the conjunction "And" indeed indicates.

We have found, then, that the hypothesis of a lost leaf between l. 235 and l. 236 not only explains all the difficulties of the text at that point—such as the inappropriateness of ll. 236-41 to Sloth, their true relation to ll. 242-59, the abrupt ending of the confession of Sloth and the absence of a paragraph mark at l. 236—but also accounts for the unaccountable omission of the confession of Wrath and for the abruptness of the end of the confession of Envy.

The omission of Wrath and the confusion as to Sloth were noticed by B, and he treated them rather ingeniously. He introduced into the earlier part of Sloth's confession a declaration that he had often been so slothful as to withhold the wages of his servants and to forget to return things he had borrowed. To supply the omission of Wrath, he himself wrote a *Confessio Irae*, totally different in style from the work of A, and, indeed, more appropriate for Envy than for Wrath, containing as it does no very distinctive traits of Wrath. The additions both here and in the confession of Sloth are confused, vague, and entirely lacking in the finer qualities of imagination, organization, and diction shown in all A's work. He did not attempt to deal with the other difficulties we have found.

It is possible, I suppose, to accept my argument up to the beginning of the preceding paragraph, and still maintain that B was after all the author of A also and merely rectified in his second version errors that had crept into his first. To do this, however, one must resolutely shut one's eyes to the manifest and manifold differences in mental qualities, in constructive ability, in

vividness of diction, in versification, and in many other matters, that exist between A I–VIII and B. These will form a part of the volume in which I hope to define the portions of this great poem to be allotted to each of the principal writers engaged upon it, to set forth clearly their differences, and to vindicate for the first author the rank he clearly deserves. The work will not be, I think, entirely one of destructive criticism. The poem, as a whole, will gain in interest and significance; and the intellectual life of the second half of the fourteenth century will seem even more vigorous than it has seemed.

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